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Monk Quartet Dances with Taste [Review of Meredith Monk Dance Company's Performance of "Tour 8: Castle' at the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee, Milwaukee]

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Monk quartet dances with taste

By Curtis L. Carter

The distinguished critics of the Milwaukee Journal Company, Joslyn and Monfried, found the Meredith Monk Dance Company's performance of "Tour 8: Castle" at UWM, February 12 and 13, insulting, ugly, embarrassing, boring, meaningless, and akin to bedlam.

I found the experience none of these. It was a very interesting opportunity to participate in moments of an artisic process which emphasizes creative exploration within the limits of an explicit theory of art.

"Tour 8: Castle" is a multimedia piece which uses not only dance but also words, music, and theater. As she explained in a dance workshop, Miss Monk believes that by "mixing things" you get additional levels in the experience of the dance. The result approaches a new form of opera.

The form of her work is not in a free style. A distinct formal order programs all but minute details of the performance. The notation consists of verbal notes and photographs.

Due to the abstract character of the work, there is no "plot" as such. The action progresses along a pattern set by the formal structure, consisting of a prologue, three scenes, and an epilogue.

The prologue is in progress when the audience enters. Lying flat on their backs with knees drawn to the chest and held by clasped hands are some thirty motionless bodies.

After a few minutes the bodies slowly unfolded, arose, and eventually formed a corps which flowed off with continuously slow, sustained motion. The visual impact of the slowly moving corps was striking. Using natural bodily movement, Miss Monk's dancers presented the effect of body movement as seen through a strobe effect or by slow motion film technique. The secret to this is a principle of continuously flowing movement with no stoppage familiar in Oriental dances.

Highly structured

The three scenes repeat essentially the same structural elements, with variations. The highly abstract character of the images does not warrant assignment of specific content or meanings. However, what is presented is in the form of archetypal images depicting feelings and universal events.

The images are perhaps best understood as manifestations of deeper psychic levels of human experience.

"We are trying to make connection between our lives and our art work without sacrificing either," said Miss Monk. Relations between people in the performing group are important in the process. Accordingly, great demands are placed upon the performer. He cannot merely "perform" in the external sense. Concern with creating lasting experiences in which the whole person may participate, the artist must reach deep into his own inner resources and utilize these in the dance.

Through this approach Miss Monk hopes to reach people on multiple levels so that they are drawn into the ideas and feeling of the dance.

Abstractions

There are some important features of this work worthy of special note. Dance by nature is a highly abstract art. But Miss Monk moves a step forward by incorporating additional elements of abstraction in the music and in the plotless action images which are held together entirely by the form and by their organization in the perceptual field of the viewer.

The music composed by Miss Monk and produced with human voice and electric organ is difficult to characterize. It resembles in some respects Oriental music or perhaps electronic.

The search for appropriate sound bodily movements correlations is another interesting feature of Miss Monk's work. Both in the workshop training sessions for dancers and in this production she explores the potential of sound-movement correlations in ways that I have not seen before.

Not everything in this performance is new or necessarily successful. Playwrights Beckett, Weis and Warner employ in the theater conventions which prepare us for Miss Monks work.

Some deletions helpful

Certain parts of the piece as it now stands could be deleted with benefit. Near the end a figure draped in white, standing on a ladder is wheeled through. This does not add to what has been shown in the previous scene.

Despite minor objections, however, I found the experience interesting, rich in meaning, and to be taken seriously.

All of this adds up to quite a different view of the work than is expressed by other critics. What I saw was the work of a warm and dedicated artist with some unusual ideas worthy of testing and with the courage to implement the ideas.

The experimental group is vulnerable, of course. But experimentation is how art lives and grows.

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